

ART EXHIBITION CATALOGUES REPUBLISHED ON MICROFICHE

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**GALERIE CHALETTE CORDIALLY INVITES
YOU TO PREVIEW AN EXHIBITION OF
GEOMETRIC PAINTINGS**

1945 - 1953

BY LEON POLK SMITH

ON SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 7, 1970

FROM 11 A.M. - 5 P.M. AT 9 E 88 ST., N.Y.C.

LAWRENCE ALLOWAY:

LEON POLK SMITH'S

GEOMETRIC PAINTINGS 1945-1953

In 1961, reflecting on his earlier work, Leon Smith recorded that "Mondrian's discovery of the interchangeability of form and space greatly interested me, even though it was limited to rectilinear shapes. In the early 40s I set out from Mondrian to find a way of freeing this concept so that it could be expressed with the use of the curved line as well as straight." He solved this problem in 1954 and it is his subsequent work for which he is known, vibrant two-color free-form paintings, in which large planes of color balance and oppose each other across a flowing boundary, sometimes as much as seven feet long as it spans a canvas from edge to edge.

The paintings in this exhibition reveal for the first time the full range of Smith's geometric abstract art, as well as indicate features that prefigure the later work. To consider the variety of the ways in which he uses grids is one means

of indicating this curiosity and his restlessness. In *Inch Squares*, 1949; for instance, the color never exceeds the basic unit of the grid, but in the tondo *Homage to Victory Boogie-Woogie*, 1946-47, the grid is sometimes stated by single squares of intense color and sometimes subsumed in larger squares of up to thirty-six small squares in area. A grid is associated with ordering, with control, but it is a very flexible kind of system and within it Smith was free to distribute color at will. Throughout the works in the present show the grid is more or less felt, sometimes supporting a mosaic of small colors, sometimes more like a massive armature.

Three main groupings suggest themselves in his paintings of this period, though the grid structure and his warm, subtle color range are constant. These groups may be called columns, all-over paintings, and diagonal passage paintings. The first and third names are taken directly from the artist's own titles and the second is derived from the kind of order suggested by the visual equality of the formal elements.

The paintings called "columns", 1945-47, reveal a subtle tactic of Smith's in relating part and whole, small forms and large. These paintings consist of the repetition of small forms in rows, related by a governing though not obtrusive grid, with color changes that imply larger families of form—the columns indicated by the titles. Pale forms, established by shifts of color in the sequential forms, emerge as implicit presences of great subtlety and firmness. This sense of form as a relation of extremes, of small units and large aggregates, without an intervening range of middle-sized forms, is constant in Smith's art,

with very few exceptions, and is a source of the clarity and impact of his work at all periods. *Center Column*, 1945, and *Center Column blue-red*, 1947, are, respectively, early and late, severe and ebullient, examples of this kind of structure.

There is a group of paintings, 1946-48, the forms in which are sometimes referred to by Smith as initial letters, especially L and C, often reversed. Occasionally these resemble sections of rectangles but the all-over animation of the surface that results more than justifies the comparison to letter forms. The painting *Red-Black*, 1947-48, is one of the first of these and *Black-white*, 1947-48 is slightly later. Together the "initials" animate the whole surface evenly, retaining horizontal and vertical axes, but obliterating implicit columnar forms, or any other governance. These forms echo the rigid pictograms of cattle brands, familiar to Smith who grew up in the South-west. Instead of subdividing the surface of the painting Smith activates it equally all-over, so that the principle of organization has to do with density rather than with balance. This kind of structure was being approached experimentally by several artists at the time and the relevance of Smith's solution was recognized early by Sidney Janis and Michel Seuphor.*

A third group of paintings, 1948-52, resumes the theme of implicit form but in a more dynamic way than the "columns". These are paintings containing

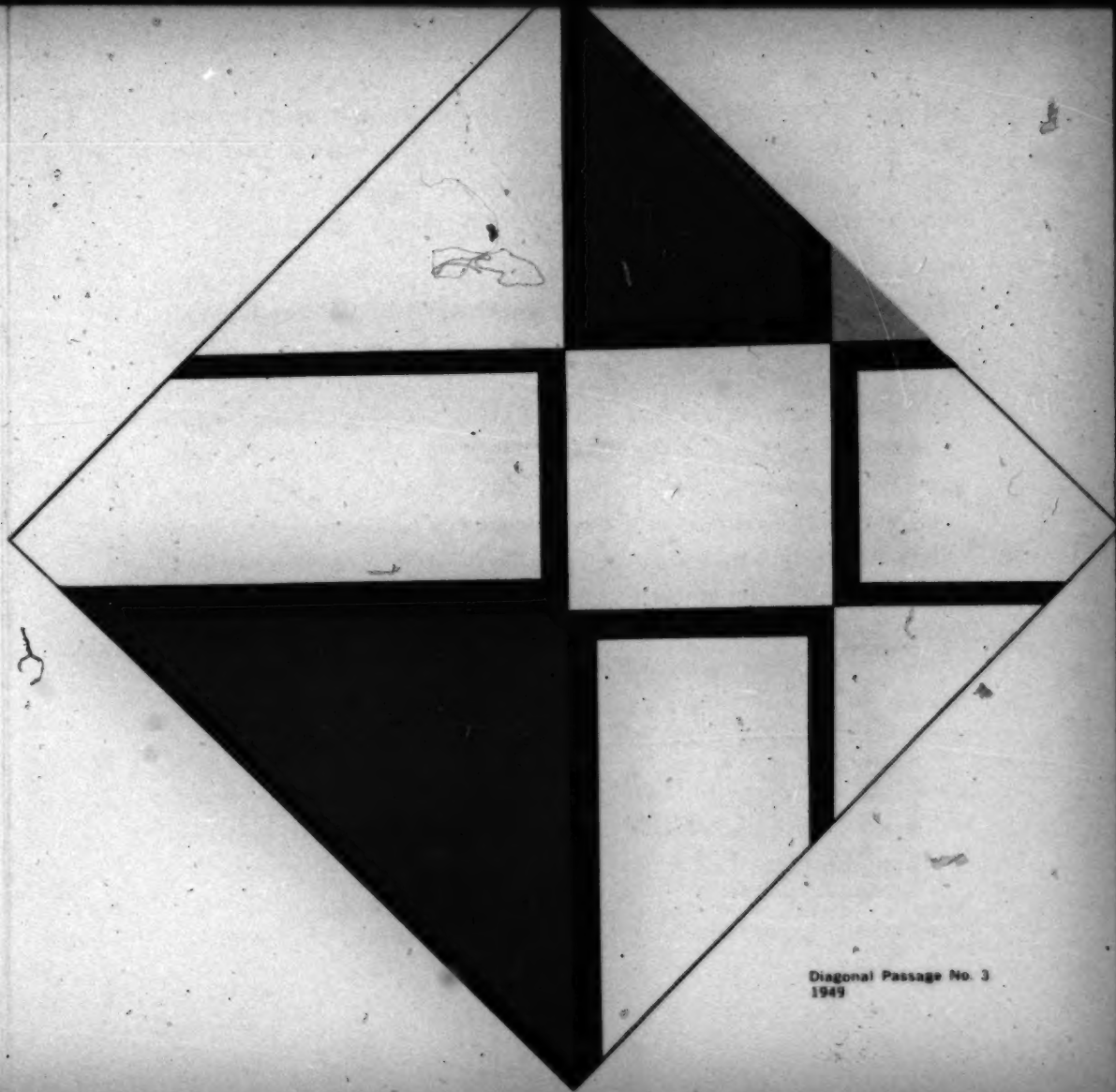
*Sidney Janis included all-over paintings in his exhibition *Post-Mondrian Painters*, 1949, and Michael Seuphor reproduced one in a survey of American Abstract painting in *Art d'Aujourd'hui*, 1951.

rectangles given strong presence by the varied thickness of their black contours. Three sides of the rectangles are closed but the fourth side is open, so that the internal color is against the edge of the painting itself. This creates an effect of thrust, as if the forms were pressing in from the perimeter or from outside the painting. They never intersect but contact is a momentous touching of corners, so that between each junction of four rectangles a void is set up. Because of the solidity of the converging planes and the sharpness of the corner contact a diagonal is implied, as by pressure. By avoiding overlapping and by stopping his forms from spanning the canvas, Smith has created, as the titles declare, diagonal passages. Strictly right-angled form used to create a diagonal space is a remarkable discovery, enlarging the concreteness of abstract art without reducing the astringency of the elements.

In *Black-White Repeat*, 1952-53, identical areas alternate in our vision, canceling the stability of figure-field relationships. The forms are geometric in derivation but wholistic in our perception, leading to *Black-White with Red*, 1952-53, a tondo in which a section of the interlocking black and white areas is enlarged with respect to the total area of the painting. This spreading of space on the surface shows that Smith is on the verge of his later works. With Smith, as with other American artists, it is important not to lose sight of early work because of our admiration for the later. The continuities are as revealing and interesting as the style-changes and "break-throughs" we tend to celebrate, and with this show the unity of Smith's oeuvre is made clear.



Red-Black
1946-1947



Diagonal Passage No. 3
1949

